

# BEXHILL MUSEUM OF COSTUME AND SOCIAL HISTORY

MANOR GARDENS, OLD TOWN, BEXHILL



“Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,  
But not expressed in fancy; rich not gaudy:  
For the apparel oft proclaim the man . . . .”

Spoken by Polonius in “Hamlet”  
by William Shakespeare.

## BEXHILL MUSEUM OF COSTUME AND SOCIAL HISTORY

This friendly Museum is situated in the small but delightful gardens of the Manor Barn in the Old Town and its displays have been described by an authority as a "potted social history".

This is a private Museum which was opened in 1972. The present exhibits are a development from the original collection of costumes and memorabilia accumulated over the years as stage wardrobes and properties by the Principals of the Thalia School of Speech and Drama, Mrs. Christine Portch and Miss Isabel Overton. To these have been added gifts from many sources and the present owner, Mrs. Portch, would like to thank all those who have kindly contributed in this way to extend the interest of the Museum.

It is staffed by voluntary workers who are always happy to take visitors round and to offer interesting information about the exhibits. A tour takes from half to three quarters of an hour.

The displays include copies of costumes from very early times and genuine costumes from 1740 and show progressive fashion up to quite recent years. The costumes are shown with contemporary items to give added interest and a special feature is a Victorian kitchen with actual household utensils used during that period.



On entering the Museum, please turn left where the first case you will find contains various dolls and other items, the most interesting of which are:-

1. Small doll - 1840 - made in Sonneberg, a German toy making centre. The red dress is original. Doll has wooden hands and arms, with hand-made wax coated papier-mache body and with eyes that open and close. The curls are painted on just above the ears.
- 2/3. Two wax dolls - about 1850. No.2 is a "child doll". Clothes are of the period, beautifully hand-made.
4. Fair doll - 1890 - has original petticoat. Made in Germany by Cuno and Otto Dressel (1725-1925).
5. German doll - 1860 - has painted shoes and socks (glazed) and hair. The green dress is the original and so is the pinafore.
6. Baby doll made in Germany around 1910 by Armand Marseille.
- 7/9. Three dolls: No.7 "Patricia" - mid 1920s; real hair; eyes close. No.8 "Blanche Margaret" - 1915, and No.9 "Alice" 1915/1920; note plaits.
10. Doll in cot-early 1900s.
11. Doll has hands made of material - origin unknown.
12. French doll - around 1917 has body of kid. Not the original head which is English 1918.
13. Small doll, probably bought at a popular bazaar.
14. Dutch painted wooden doll (not original clothes).



15. Doll made of papier-mache, possibly Second World War period. Wedding dress has been trimmed at home with hand-made crochet.

16. Group of small dressed dolls brought back from a French chateau by soldiers of First World War.

17. Three coloured dolls and sailor doll (mascot of the Cunard ships) made by Norah Wellings who had a small factory in England; a special manufacture, of which she retained the secret.

18. "Punch" - 200 years old.

19. Teddy Bears, named after "Teddy" Roosevelt who enjoyed hunting bears; early 1900s; the early ones have longer snouts than the more recent ones. You may like to note the Teddy Bear in postman's uniform.

20. Celluloid doll of the 1920s.

21. Home made "rag" doll.

22. Black doll made by Pedigree.

23. Chinese doll.

24. China doll - about 1900 - with fair hair (modern). Face and pinafore original.

Other items of interest in this case:-

- (a) Two dolls' corsets. The red one is hand sewn of the mid 1800s. The larger one (1767) is made of whalebone, possibly for a "Fashion Doll", i.e. before fashion books were published.
- (b) Two dresses hanging at back (left and right) were copies of dresses worn by the child's mother.
- (c) Shirt (on left) hand-made test piece - example of hemming, gathering, seaming, button-holing, etc.
- (d) Victorian stereoscope (on right), patent approved, about 1885. Gives 3D effect.



- (e) Various items of dolls' clothing - gloves, socks, bonnets, etc. and furniture.
- (f) Very small dolls and animals with tiny hand-crocheted garments of the 1930s.

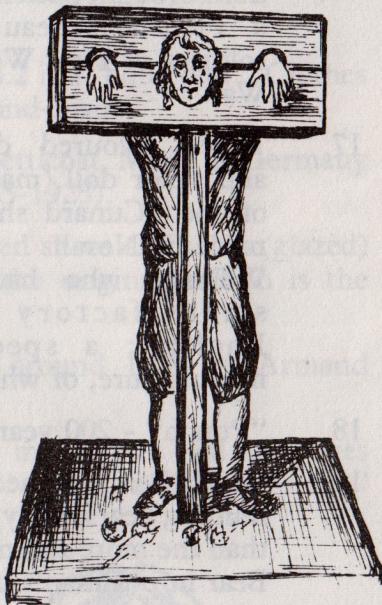
## The Medieval Town

The second case shows a model of a medieval town with its inhabitants going about their daily work.

In medieval times the church services were in Latin and not always understood by the common people, so plays were enacted in the churches to illustrate the Bible stories. As congregations grew, it became customary for the plays to be performed on a raised platform outside the church. Later the plays, named Miracle Plays, were taken to outlying villages on wagons, called Pageants, and the actors were members of various guilds.

The visitor can see an example of a pageant, a pillory and stocks, the latter two being the medieval forms of public punishment.

The model also shows the different types of clothes worn by nobility and peasants. The latter had very homespun garments made from the wool which they had spun themselves and then dyed from their own vegetable dyes, whilst the material would have been quite rough and the colours subdued. The nobility, on the other hand, had rich materials made from silk, for example, which would have been brightly coloured.



## The Tudor Period

In Tudor times the effect of the Renaissance was very evident. The importing of many brocades, both velvet and silk, with gold and silver threads, gave a richness to costume; the frequent meetings with foreigners added new fashions to England's wardrobes.

A woman would wear a farthingale under her dress skirt, while the upper portion of her body would be encased in a corset made from iron, leather or wood.

Children's fashions followed those of the adults.

A ruff was a favourite item of dress worn by both men and women. At first these were made from horsehair, but after the introduction of starch into England from Holland, fine linen materials were used and ruffs became more elaborate, often edged with lace.



## The Georgians

Space in the Museum does not permit the showing of costumes of the Stuart or Restoration period.

The next items on view, which are original costumes of their age, are those of the 1700s. By this time a change in style for both men and women, particularly the upper classes, was extremely marked. The ladies' dresses became very exaggerated; especially was this evident in the pannier dress which was sometimes as much as six feet wide. This was modified in time to become the "polonaise", examples of which are on view.

The artificiality of the period was also evident in the ladies' hairstyles - which were often dressed to as much as two feet high and their aids to "improve nature", such as false bosoms which became known as "bosom friends". The men sometimes shaved their heads and wore wigs; these were powdered with wheat flour. The men, too, endeavoured to improve on nature by wearing facial make-up, false calves and rumps.

The men's clothes now showed the doublet and hose replaced by coat, vest and knee breeches; the first two items were frequently embroidered with silk or metallic threads.

### Quotation from the London Magazine of 1768.

"False locks to supply deficiency of hair, pomatum in profusion, greasy wool to bolster up the adopted hair, and grey powder to conceal the dust. -A hairdresser is described as asking a lady how long it was since her head had been opened and repaired; she answered, not above nine weeks; to which he replied that that was as long as a head could well go in summer; and that therefore it was proper to deliver it now, as it began to be a little hazardé."



## The Early Years



Following the French Revolution, there was a complete break from the earlier exaggerated styles and rich materials. Ladies now wore printed cotton or muslin styles in the "Neo-classical Empire" manner, high waisted with a simple straight line. Pantellettes were worn underneath the skirts and poke bonnets were fashionable. Cotton, being washable contributed to the new craze for hygiene, introduced by the Empress Josephine. Beau Brummell inaugurated cleanliness among men -he is said to have changed his clothes three times a day and sent them to the country for laundering to benefit from the fresh air.

At this time, England became the leader of men's fashions; knee breeches gave way to long trousers and the cut-away coat became fashionable. The materials used were plainer, and the cut and fit of the garments were of great importance. Hats were of beaver and it was fashionable to carry a cane.



# 19th Century

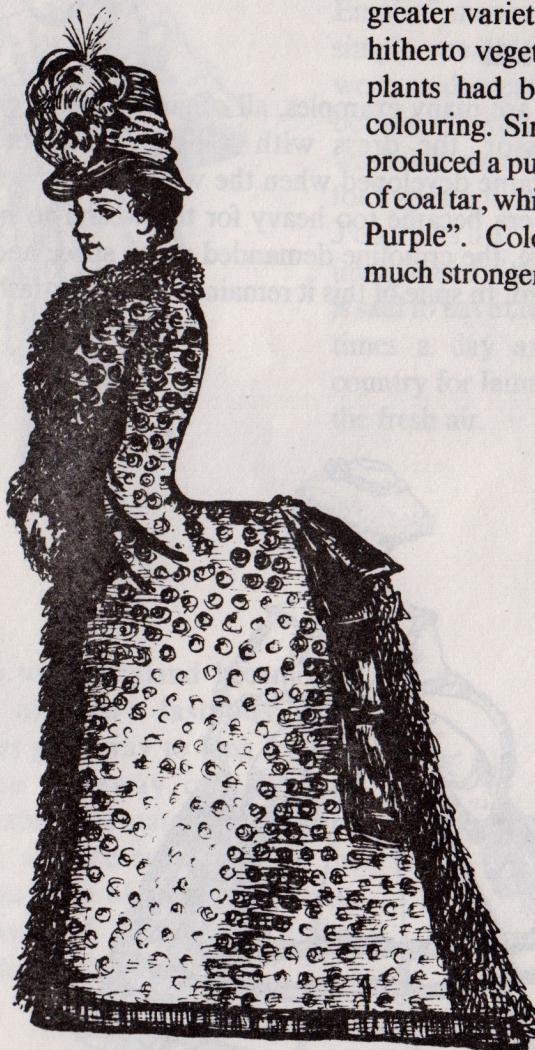
Around the early 1830s the simple straight line of ladies dress was beginning to give way to more fullness together with very exaggerated sleeves, some having as much as sixteen yards of material in each. To balance the tremendous width of the sleeves, the skirt became very full and was supported by numerous petticoats.

## The Victorian Period

In the Museum there are many examples, all originals, of the crinoline dress and its successor, the dress with a bustle. The crinoline was supported by a frame developed when the weight of the petticoats worn in the previous era became too heavy for the wearer to hold up. Difficult to manoeuvre, the crinoline demanded much space and was a considerable fire hazard. In spite of this it remained a popular fashion for many years.



Children's clothes of this period were a simplified version of those of their elders, but it is interesting to note that until they were four or five years old boys wore dresses, as instanced by the dress in our collection which was worn by the young Sir Winston Churchill.

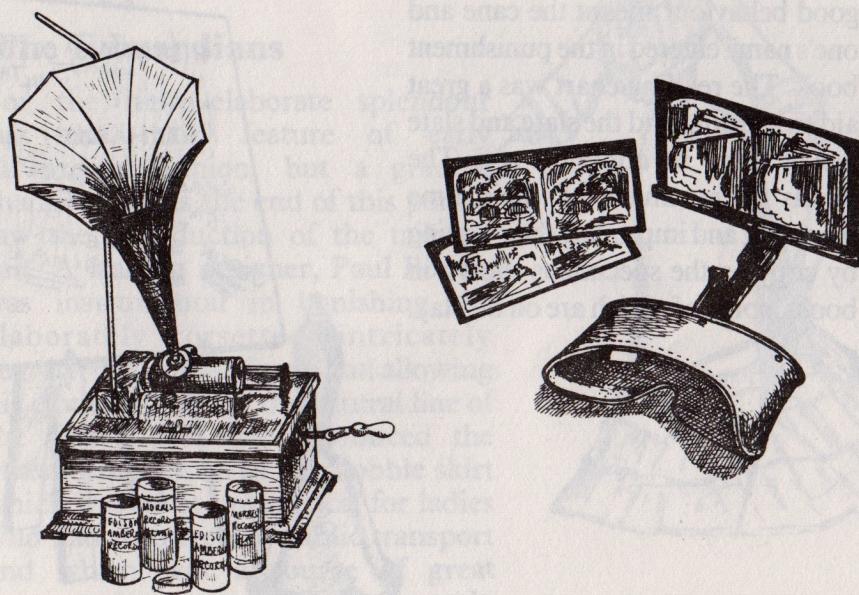


The discovery of chemical dyes meant a greater variety of colours of materials; hitherto vegetables, leaves and various plants had been the main source of colouring. Sir William Henry Perkins produced a purple dye from the product of coal tar, which was known as "Perkins Purple". Colours in general became much stronger and denser.

Partly as a result of the industrial revolution and partly perhaps as mourning for Prince Albert, men wore darker colours and gradually black became the correct wear for gentlemen of the middle or upper class.



The Victorian Age was remarkable for its enormous developments in the industrial field and arising from these there was an accumulation in the home (for all who could afford them) of many aids to comfort and amusement. The Museum is fortunate in having many interesting items in its collection which help to set the scene of a period cluttered with furnishings, ornaments and gadgets.

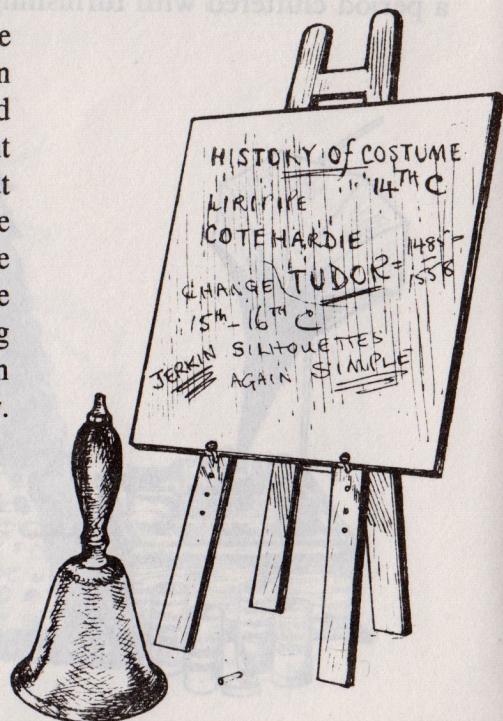


## The 20th Century

The turn of the century saw once more a considerable change in ladies' fashions. Gone were the outrageous crinolines and bouncing bustles of the Victorians and in their place came "S" bend corsets and the artificial "pouter pigeon" chests. Skirts were still ground length and dragged in the dust and dirt at every step; it was an age of constant brushing and fastening of hooks and eyes and tiny buttons, usually by some poor little lady's maid. This was an era of sweated labour, class distinction and snobbery.

It was an age of the essential white pinafore for the girls (particularly of the upper and lower middle class) and the stiff Eton collars, knicker-bockers and boots for the boys.

The schoolmaster and mistress were persons to be revered and a lapse in good behaviour meant the cane and one's name entered in the punishment book. The reading chart was a great aid to learning and the slate and slate pencil were in common use. The pupils spent much of their time practising and improving their writing by copying the specimens shown in books, some of which are on display.



## The Nursery

The nursery in the past was always a feature of the houses of the middle and upper classes. The nursery was presided over by a nanny and the children were visited by their parents only at specified times of the day, such as bathtime or bedtime, possibly before their dinner or an evening function. The visitor may like to notice the large fireguard, dropsided and swing cots and the high chair, the style of which has undergone little change in the last 70 years.



## The Edwardians

For the rich, elaborate splendour was the main feature of early Edwardian fashion, but a gradual change towards the end of this period saw the introduction of the tailored suit. A leading designer, Paul Poiret, was instrumental in banishing the elaborately corsetted, intricately curved "S" shaped figure and allowing his clothes to follow the natural line of the figure. He also introduced the outlandish fashion of the hobble skirt which was most impractical for ladies who had to travel by public transport and which was a source of great amusement to interested male onlookers.

## The Start of Modern Fashion

We have a final look at the extravagant side of fashion in the period leading up to the First World War. The wealthy, mature ladies still wore long dresses of rich materials with elaborate hats as a crowning glory, but the domination of these ladies as fashion leaders was soon to be eclipsed by other, stronger influences.

Arguably, the most important influence on fashion was the Great War. Women began to take on more and more work hitherto done only by men. By replacing menfolk who were away at the front, the women needed clothes which were more practical and safer for work in factories. Ostentation was frowned upon as being against the national war effort.

The motor-car and the increasing use by all classes of public transport also left their mark on fashion, as did, too, the popularity of cinemas which began to exert an influence on clothes, particularly those worn by the young. This change is reflected in the styles of those models on view which relate to the 1920s and 1930s.





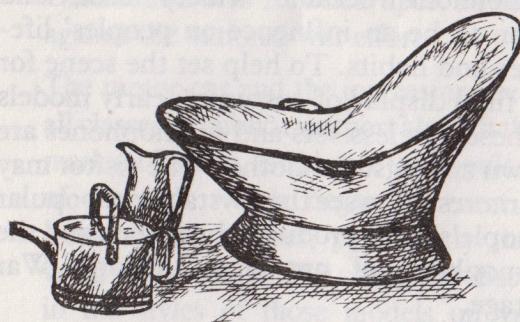
Following the Great War, young people especially seemed to want to enjoy themselves as never before. The craze for different dances, such as the charleston, the tango and the popular tea-dances, swept the world. These in turn led to a freedom in the style of clothes which can be seen in the flapper girl of the 1920s with her Eton cropped hair, and the figure fitting gown of the 1930s.



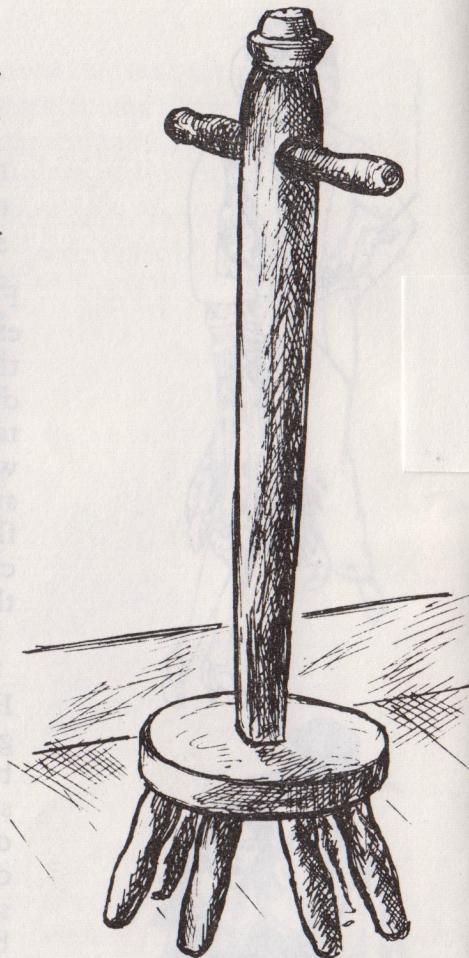
From this time, the wireless and the gramophone became widely used and began to be an influence on peoples' lifestyles and habits. To help set the scene for our final display of costumes, early models of these wireless sets and gramophones are shown amongst the clothes. The visitor may be interested to see the crystal set, a popular "People's Set" produced by Philco and the gramophone of pre-Second World War vintage.

## The Victorian Kitchen

As we said in our introduction our museum has been likened to a "potted social history". This could be because displayed among and alongside the costumes is the paraphernalia of everyday life. The principal feature is the Victorian kitchen which contains an interesting and varied selection of the utensils which would have been found in any kitchen of the day. They show how, in the absence of modern labour-saving devices, life was very hard and even the simplest task involved considerable drudgery.



Hip Bath



Washing Dolly

Butter Churn  
and Butter Pats



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illustrations*



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